

You and I have been very much in the news these present days. And no, I don't mean the ongoing debt ceiling negotiation. I don't know that any of you are taken up in that particular morass, though if you are a 5<sup>th</sup> grade civics teacher or a 1<sup>st</sup> grade playground chaperone you may be called in to pinch-hit. Instead, you and I have been in the news ever since the dateline from Oslo. At first glance, of course, it wasn't about us: Friday a week ago, a pair of attacks took the lives of seventy-seven Norwegian citizens, at most recent count, and the world was quick to assume that the violence was the work of Islamic extremists. "Terrorists," we called them. For most of a full 24-hour news cycle we played the part of the co-suffering outsider: we know how you're feeling. It happened to us, too.

And then the story changed. The police arrested Anders Breivik, the self-confessed architect of the twin massacres, and he was no Muslim. Quite the opposite, or so the narrative went: We found out that his actions were motivated by his Christian faith, a faith that, in his hands, compelled him to violent retaliation against what he perceived to be the encroachment of multiculturalism and secular progressivism throughout Europe. And so, as the media vitriol shifted from its usual Islamic target to a religion perhaps closer to home, the rhetoric from the pundits took on a new tone and careened to a new fever pitch, Breivik's Christian manifesto a too-tempting target for the whole spectrum of political agendas. I have to admit a certain reluctance to offer even the briefest time in this pulpit to any one of them. But I am equally loathe to bury my head in the sand. And so, as a single example for the morning, the voice of blogger and CNN personality Erick Erickson. A somewhat lengthy quote follows, though I don't think you'll have any trouble figuring out where he stops and I begin:

*Why is the left so gleeful that the Norwegian is a "conservative Christian"? Secular leftists and Islamists are both of this world. Christians may be traveling through, but we are most definitely not of the world. The Bible is quite on point about this: in fact, Christ commands us to throw off our ties to this world. But the things of this world love this world and hate the things of God. All of them can pile on and condemn the Christian because the Christian is just passing through, a stranger in a strange land.*

We didn't read Romans 1 this morning, but maybe we should have, if only to remind ourselves that the Gospel is the power of salvation for *everyone* who has faith – not just for everyone who behaves. And so there is no question, Mr. Erickson, that, even only by the power of his confession, Anders Breivik is a Christian, and consequently a Christian terrorist. All other political labels aside, I am thankful that his ultimate fate is in neither your hands nor mine. But what struck me most about Erickson's words was the outright claim that Christians don't have to deal with the things of this world, the implication that we are somehow houseguests who don't have to do the dishes. And so I want this morning to take up this question as a way of asking what sort of Christians are we to be in the wake of such tragedy. Can we share in Mr. Erickson's victimized defiance of the things of this world? Are we really to find solace as strangers in this strange land?

Well, I agree with Mr. Erickson in one regard. The Bible *is* quite on point about this. But rather than join him in Exodus, where the original language of "stranger in a strange land" refers not metaphorically to the human condition but literally (and noteworthily) to a family of illegal immigrants – you may have heard of Moses –, this morning we will take up Chestnut Hill's ongoing summer sermon series on the Great Prayers of the Old Testament, joining King Hezekiah in 2 Kings, with the enemies at the gates, a leader with, possibly, a similar sort of defiance on his mind.

Now, I'll grant that 2 Kings 19 isn't exactly in the usual rotation of Sunday School stories. Frankly, chapters like these are why Biblical pronunciation guides were invented. But do yourself a favor: don't let the *un*-familiarity obscure the high drama of the moment. Hezekiah, good obedient King in Jerusalem, is met with his greatest challenge. The Assyrian army has taken up positions surrounding the city, and the Assyrian emissary has been using every rhetorical tactic he can think of to force the people into surrender. In a last-ditch effort, the emissary finally writes directly to the king: *don't be fooled by your God. Don't be fooled by promises of deliverance. Haven't you heard what we did to the last people whose gods were going to protect them? Do you even remember their names?*

The procedure for the royal court in such a situation is for Isaiah, the official prophet of the court, to make the dutiful prayers of petition. But the narrator lets Isaiah be, off to the side, a perfunctory sort of thing. Instead, the dramatic interest follows the King – not to the battlefield, not to the court, not to the public square – but into the temple, into the house of the Lord, into the chamber of the Arc itself, into the very presence of Yahweh. "O Lord the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth... Check out what this guy wrote! Can you believe the nerve? You gonna just stand by and let him mouth off?"

So you may not know this story, but you've read enough of the Bible to know how this one goes. God hears Hezekiah's prayer. The city is saved – though, as Cindy would say, "it's complicated," so you'll have to read the rest on your own time. And, like sports radio callers the day after a win, we might not be inclined to critique Hezekiah's performance. But there is something unsettling, is there not, about a King who, in the moment of crisis, in the moment of need, in the moment when his people need him the most, disappears? Retreats? Hides, here, in the safety of the church?

*O Lord, the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim...* You can just picture it. Hezekiah is in the inner sanctum of the temple. The cherubim aren't poetic devices; they're the carvings of angels that surround the actual arc of the covenant. This is the temple that God told the Kings to build as His dwelling-place: so Hezekiah has come to where God is to defy the world of the things of man; he's turned his back, and by calling on the transcendence of his Creator he has offered his loudest protest to the chaos around him. He plays the best card he has: you are enthroned *above* the cherubim; you alone are the holiest of holies; you are God alone. This is his moment of truth, the chips are down, or stacked against him, or both, depending on your metaphorical

preference –in the face of an enemy who is now publicly defying the God of Israel, Hezekiah runs into the temple, shuts the door, and defies the world right back.

Does it sound familiar? *The things of this world love this world and hate the things of God. All of them can pile on and condemn the Christian because the Christian is just passing through...* Don't get too mad at Hezekiah. We hide here all the time. It's our favorite card in the deck, and we play it every time we can. When the going gets tough, the *tough* get going, but the Christian: well, the Christian isn't really of this world, so, not to be glib about it, but our hands are clean. Chestnut Hill is getting a Pottery Barn?... well, this I have to see! But Camden cries out for justice and healing... it's okay, God will reward them at the end times, and I don't want to get in the way. The meek will inherit the earth, later, right? The poor in spirit get the Kingdom of Heaven? Well, I won't bother them with the things of *this* world. God will sort them out soon enough. But I will keep them in my prayers, where I can make my protest heard... silently. You know, come to think of it, I can even do that while I'm standing in line at Pottery Barn...!

I do not mean to mock the power of authentic prayer. Again: Hezekiah's prayer is heard and answered, and his is not the only one. And it is profoundly true that prayer inherently defies the logic of the world, that it claims and calls upon a God whose power exceeds anything we can perceive. But I do mean to draw a fine line – a mile-wide fine line – between defiance of the world for God's sake and defiance of the world for our sake, the lazy retreat from a vocational call we just don't want to answer. Here's a shorthand way to know the difference: if it's convenient, it's probably, and I here I use a word of some theological refinement, hogwash. Which is the only way I can hear pieces of Breivik's Christian manifesto. I'm quoting again:

*I'm pretty sure I will pray to God as I'm rushing through my city, guns blazing, with 100 armed system protectors pursuing me with the intention to stop and/or kill ... It is likely that I will pray to God for strength at one point during that operation, as I think most people in that situation would....If praying will act as an additional mental boost ... it is the pragmatical thing to do.*

There is obviously a remarkable gap between being a boneheaded pundit and being a mass-murderer. But I also hope you hear the overlapping theology between Breivik's manifesto and Erickson's victimization: the defiance of the world – either by pen or sword – not really for God's sake, but because it is “the pragmatical thing to do,” a political convenience and a theological excuse. At the risk of boneheaded punditry myself, there's simply no place for this in the church of Christ crucified.

And so we must return to Hezekiah, whom I have left somewhat unduly vilified. You'll remember: he had literally turned his back on the problems of his Kingdom and withdrawn into the innermost parts of the temple, what seems like the most convenient theology of retreat. But then this remarkable prayer: *O Lord the God of Israel, who are enthroned above the cherubim, you are God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth...* First, don't let the imagery fool you. God enthroned above the cherubim – it's a familiar image, the locus of so many hierarchies of the Heavens, with God transcendent over all the celestial powers, a God perhaps not on the front lines, just the puppet-master in the rear. But while Hebrew has words for above and below, neither one of them are in this verse. Literally, God dwells the cherubim: beneath, within, above, among, around, yes, and.

Because, in the second place, this is the God who made Heaven *and* Earth, a God whose jurisdiction extends far beyond the confines of the arc, far beyond doors of the temple, far beyond the gates of the city. Hezekiah gets it, in a way that his enemies simply cannot: there is no outside boundary to God's providence, neither in the temple, nor in the courtyard, nor in the battlefield. And to each of us, in those moments when we would retreat into the convenient defiance of a world in which we claim only to be strangers, let me say this as clearly as I can: there is no hiding-place, neither in Heaven nor on Earth, from God's call. We are all witnesses to the providence of the Living God to whom Hezekiah prays. I'm not telling you to get off the sideline. I'm telling you there's no sideline. God is not cowering in the back. God is not biding his time until the last day. And those of us who pray to this same living God must do likewise. The good news isn't that you don't have to fight. The good news is that you don't have to fight alone.

The Bible, it turns out, is quite on point about this. “God chose what is foolish *in the world* to shame the wise,” Paul writes to the church at Corinth. “God chose what is weak *in the world* to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised *in the world*, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” Friends, take courage – not in the illusion that this world is not of God, but rather in the certainty that it is precisely this, a world created for God's purposes. It is not without sorrow. Not without brokenness, and not without tragedy, a truth never more evident than in the aftermath of 77 dead. But this is what the cross means: not only that God created the world, but that even despite the sorrow, even despite the brokenness, even despite the tragedy, God claims us as his own. Yes, the Gospel offers us no place to hide. The Gospel affords us no Harry Potter cloaks of invisibility. It arms us with no legendary wands, to be masters of our own universe. But what we have is a resurrection stone, rolled away, the final sign that God's lordship over this world cannot be defied.

What sort of Christians are we to be in the wake of the dateline from Oslo? The answer is simply this: defiant ones, for God's sake. Christians who defy injustice. Christians who defy intolerance. Christians who defy idolatry, who defy violence, who defy hatred, for God's sake. Christians like the 11 clergy arrested Friday in the Capitol Rotunda for praying in defiance of these budget proposals, who know full well the link between economic stratification and the intolerance that Breivik espoused. Christians like those involved in the Partnership to End Gun Violence here in Philadelphia, a group that knows equally well that God's call to justice sometimes requires taking to the streets. And Christians like Lutheran priest Anne Mari Tronvik, who joined with a Muslim Imam to carry the casket at the first funeral for one of Breivik's victims in defiance of the hatred and fear that could have otherwise ruled the day. Who are we meant to be? Simply this: Christians who defy the world in prayer, who glorify God in worship, and who testify to his providence in service, not because it's convenient but especially when it's difficult, not as strangers just passing through, but as stewards of God's good creation, with a vision of peace, with a vision of righteousness, with a vision of justice rolling down like water. Because Christ builds his church *upon* the rock, not underneath it.